

Grand jury indicts 5 on federal charges in New Mexico compound case

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Prosecutors allege there was a plan to prepare for violent attacks, but the cousin of a defendant denied the children were being trained for mass shootings.

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A federal grand jury in New Mexico on Tuesday returned indictments on federal firearms and conspiracy charges against five people arrested after authorities allegedly found 11 hungry children and the body of another boy at a makeshift compound last month.

Federal prosecutors said in a criminal complaint that the five charged had a "common plan to prepare for violent attacks on government, military, educational, and financial institutions" as part of one of the defendant's religious prophecies.

Siraj Ibn Wahhaj, 40; Jany Leveille, 35; Hujrah Wahhaj, 37; Subhanah Wahhaj, 35; and Lucas Morton, 40, are charged with one federal count each of conspiracy to provide a person unlawfully in the United States with firearms and ammunition, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Mexico said.

The indictment also charges Leveille — who authorities have said is a native of Haiti living unlawfully in the United States — with possession of firearms and ammunition.

All five were arrested in early August after police raided the compound where they lived in Amalia in Taos County, located in the northern part of the state, and found guns, ammunition, and 11 children in filthy conditions, and the body of Siraj Wahhaj's 3-year-old son, who he is accused of kidnapping from the boy's mother in Georgia.

Local prosecutors have alleged that the toddler, Abdul-Ghani Wahhaj, died in December 2017 in a religious ritual carried out because his father believed his son was possessed by demons, and that the child was denied anti-seizure medication or medical care.

Federal prosecutors say in court documents that the five charged established a training camp and firing range to prepare for attacks, and that Leveille and Siraj Wahhaj sought to train people, including children, to "be prepared to engage in jihad" and "die as martyrs."

Claims that at least once child was being training to commit school shootings have been alluded to in the past, and a local judge in denying that some of the five be held without bail said that prosecutors had alleged "there was a big plan afoot," but didn't provide evidence to the judge's satisfaction about what it was.

All five are scheduled to appear in court on Wednesday when they are expected be arraigned.

A different local judge dropped child neglect charges against the five in late August because local prosecutors missed a deadline, and charges relating to the death of the boy were dropped so that the district attorney's office could bring those counts to a grand jury. But on Aug. 31, all five were arrested on federal charges.

A federal grand jury in Albuquerque then returned the indictments Tuesday.

Von Chelet Leveille has said his sister and the rest of the group at the compound were misunderstood and he disputed allegations that the children were being taught to commit school shootings, the Associated Press reported.

He said the two older children asked to be taught to shoot, and that the family's use of firearms was legal and innocent. He also said the group went to the desert because they no longer wanted to live as American Muslims in a society mostly populated by non-Muslims.

The 11 children found at the property were taken into custody by the state.